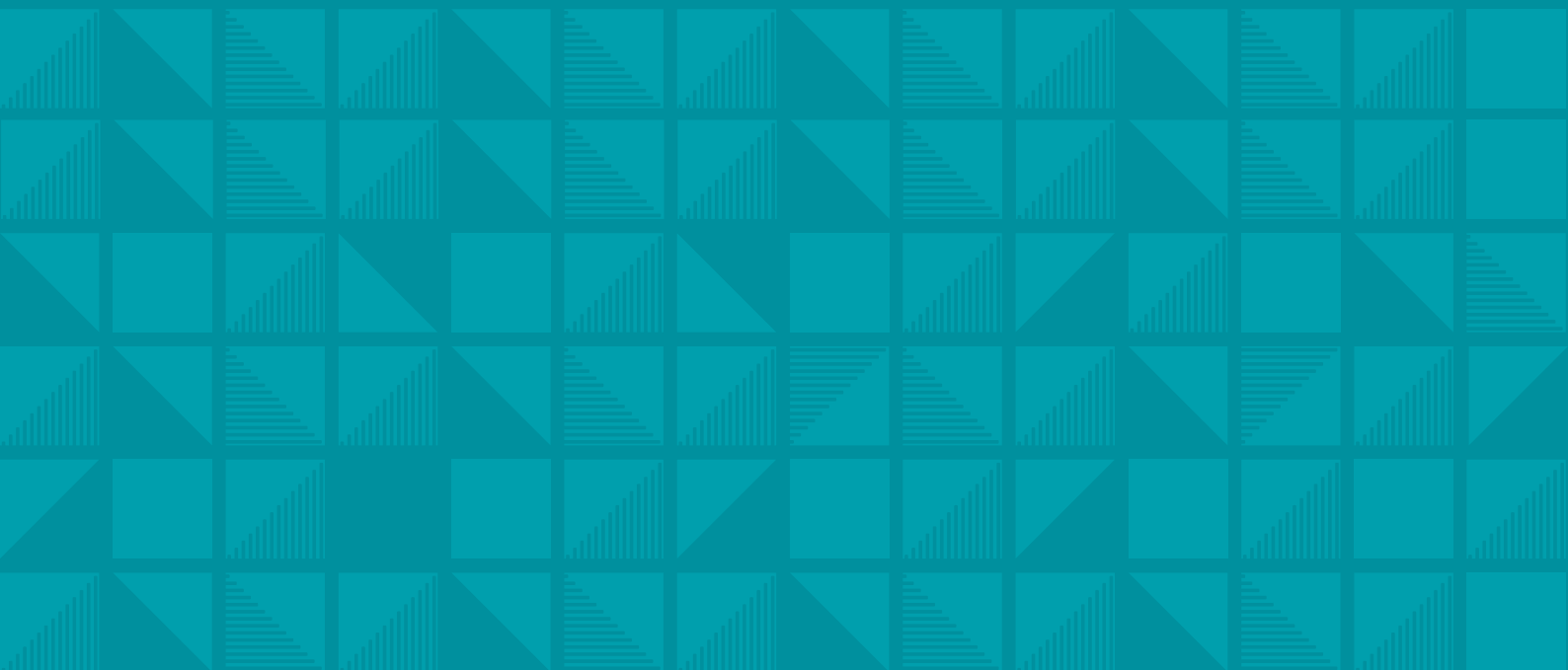


A guide to the Local Council Award Scheme



THE LOCAL COUNCIL AWARD SCHEME EXISTS TO CELEBRATE THE SUCCESSES OF THE VERY BEST LOCAL COUNCILS, AND TO PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT ALL LOCAL COUNCILS TO MEET THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.

All local councils want to serve their local communities and make a real difference to the lives of the people that live there. This scheme offers councils the opportunity to show that they meet the standards set by the sector, assessed by their peers, and to put in place the conditions for continued improvement.

The Local Council Award Scheme has been designed to both provide the tools and encouragement to those councils at the beginning of their improvement journeys, as well as promoting and recognising councils that are at the cutting edge of the sector. It is only through the sector working together to share best practice, drive up standards and supporting those who are committed to improving their offer to their communities that individual councils and the sector as a whole will reach its full potential.

The scheme was created in 2014 and is managed on behalf of local councils by the Improvement and Development Board (IDB). Councils can apply for an award at one of three levels:

The Foundation Award demonstrates that a council meets the requirements for operating lawfully and according to standard practice.

The Quality Award demonstrates that a council achieves good practice in governance, community engagement and council improvement.

The Quality Gold Award demonstrates that a council is at the forefront of best practice and achieves excellence in governance, community leadership and council development.

The scheme sets out criteria to meet at each level covering selected aspects of the council's work. Councils can seek to progress through the tiers over time thereby raising standards. Councils of any size can aspire to an award appropriate for their budget and level of activity.

To support transparency, every award level has a requirement for certain information to be published online (plus some information that does not need to be published). In all instances the council confirms that the required documents, information and conditions are in place (whether published or not) by resolution in public at a full council meeting. For Quality Gold, councils also provide statements for submission to the panel demonstrating excellence in their activities. The panel may ask for additional information to check the accuracy of claims.

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This section sets out in brief what is required for each award and then explains in more detail the evidence that the accreditation panel is looking for. Councils should find this additional guidance helpful in identifying what is required.

18 ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The Local Council Award Scheme is a form of peer review. Councils are reviewed by experienced peers through the work of an accreditation panel.

This section outlines guidance for County Associations (CALCs) managing the process for accreditation. These are not strict rules, and CALCs can tailor this to local need in consultation with NALC.

21 FEES

There are two fees:

- A registration fee paid to NALC
- An accreditation fee paid to the organisation responsible for administering the local or regional accreditation process.

22 EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

The aim of the evaluation and improvement process is to allow the sector to feel ownership of the Local Council Award Scheme, and to see the scheme changing to meet the feedback and needs expressed by the sector. This section outlines the evaluation and improvement process that will allow the scheme to be dynamic and respond over time to changes in the sector, national policy and other relevant issues.

A COUNCIL CAN REGISTER TO TAKE PART IN THE LOCAL COUNCIL AWARD SCHEME BY VISITING WWW.NALC.GOV.UK/LOCALCOUNCILAWARDScheme

THE STEP BY STEP PROCESS FOR APPLYING TO THE AWARD SCHEME CAN BE FOUND IN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS SECTION ON PAGE 18.

THE CRITERIA IN THIS BOOKLET APPLY TO COUNCILS SUBMITTING THEIR APPLICATIONS TO THEIR LOCAL ACCREDITATION PANEL FROM 1 JANUARY 2016 - 31 DECEMBER 2016. THE CRITERIA FOR THE LOCAL COUNCIL AWARD SCHEME ARE REVIEWED ANNUALLY.

TO ACHIEVE A FOUNDATION AWARD A COUNCIL DEMONSTRATES THAT IT HAS THE DOCUMENTATION AND INFORMATION IN PLACE FOR OPERATING LAWFULLY AND ACCORDING TO STANDARD PRACTICE. THE COUNCIL ALSO HAS POLICIES FOR TRAINING COUNCILLORS AND OFFICERS AND IS BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR IMPROVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT.

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it recognises its duties in relation to bio-diversity and crime and disorder, and that it has:

GOVERNANCE	COMMUNITY	DEVELOPMENT
Criteria demonstrating good governance in managing the business and finances of a council	Criteria representing a council's role in the community and how it engages with the community	Criteria representing council improvement through the management and development of staff and councillors
Its standing orders	Council contact details and councillor information in line with the Transparency Code	
Its financial regulations	Its action plan for the current year	
Its Code of Conduct and a link to councillors' registers of interests	Evidence of consulting the community	
Its publication scheme	Publicity advertising council activities	
Its last annual return	Evidence of participating in town and country planning	
Transparent information about council payments		
A calendar of all meetings including the annual meeting of electors		
Minutes for at least one year of full council meetings and (if relevant) all committee and sub-committee meetings		
Current agendas		
The budget and precept information for the current or next financial year		
Its complaints procedure		
Its accessibility statement		
Its privacy notice		

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it recognises its duties in relation to bio-diversity and crime and disorder, and that it has:

GOVERNANCE	COMMUNITY	DEVELOPMENT
Criteria demonstrating good governance in managing the business and finances of a council	Criteria representing a council's role in the community and how it engages with the community	Criteria representing council improvement through the management and development of staff and councillors
A risk management policy		Disciplinary and grievance procedures
A register of assets		A policy for training and development of staff and councillors
Contracts for all members of staff		A record of all training undertaken by staff and councillors in the last year
Up-to-date insurance policies that mitigate risks to public money		A clerk who has achieved 12 Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points in the last year

The council notifies the accreditation panel co-ordinator when the resolution has been agreed and provides a completed application form, including webpage addresses to where the information can be found online.

WHAT IS THE ACCREDITATION PANEL LOOKING FOR?

The panel seeks assurance that a council acts lawfully and according to standard practice. Unless it is a matter of law, the panel is not making a judgement on the quality of the evidence at this level; it simply confirms that the documentation and information is in place, up-to-date and complies with the guidance below. For those documents that are not posted up online, the panel may ask to see the evidence if it is considered necessary.

- All policies should comply with current legislation and guidance and note the date of the next review.
- Standing orders, financial regulations, the Code of Conduct, publication scheme, accessibility statement, privacy statement and complaints procedure are public documents tailored to the specific council. Standing orders or financial regulations explain procedures for contracts and internal controls. There should be evidence of an open media policy which does not restrict engagement with the press. For councils with an annual turnover of less than £25,000 they also demonstrate compliance with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities.
- The council does not need to publish the councillors' registers of interests on their own website provided that there is a working link to the complete register of all councillors' interests on the principal authority's website.
- The council's website should include the name of the clerk and contact details (address, phone, email) for the council as a corporate body.
It should also publish the names of councillors and councillors' responsibilities in compliance with the Local Government Transparency Code.
- The council posts up a scanned copy of the last annual return. The panel checks that the council has a limited assurance (unqualified) opinion from the external auditor; the opinion may contain recommendations for consideration as long as a qualified opinion is not given. The panel checks the arrangements for internal audit and internal controls. From 2017, councils with an annual turnover of less than £25,000 will not be required to submit their annual return for audit. Panels check that these councils comply with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities.
- Information on all payments must be transparent and in accordance with financial regulations and statutory proper practices.
- The calendar (in any format) includes the Annual Meeting of the Council and the Annual Parish/Town Meeting and both meetings must be held during the correct statutory period. The calendar also shows that the council has at least four full council meetings a year.
- Similarly, the minutes for full council meetings over the last year include the Annual Meeting of the Council. If relevant, the council also posts up the minutes of its Finance Committee to demonstrate transparency according to statutory regulations and of its Planning Committee showing that procedures for reviewing planning applications are correct. The panel checks that minutes and agendas demonstrate the lawful convening of meetings and decision-making and that all meetings allow the public to make representations to the council.

- The council can post up the current or next year's budget (or both). Budget documents would normally show columns comparing the year in question with the two previous years; they include information on income and expenditure (or receipts and payments) and show how the precept was calculated.
- The council must publish an action plan; as a minimum this is a one-page document listing the council's objectives for the current year. It is not a parish plan which is a plan for the future of the community; the council can extract objectives for action from the parish plan depending on its areas of responsibility.
- The panel seeks at least one piece of evidence from council publicity that it consults and actively serves its community. Publicity might include an annual report, web material or news bulletins. The information gives a flavour of any council activity such as lobbying principal authorities, giving grants to community groups, the provision of a service or helping with community events. For guidance, councils can refer to The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Similarly any form of consultation is suitable, including surveys, online polls, focus groups or public meetings.
- Council documents demonstrate that the council participates in the planning system by, for example, commenting on planning applications or working on a neighbourhood plan. Decisions on planning matters must be made in properly convened meetings and, if required, by delegation to a committee. Some decisions may be delegated to an officer.
- The panel may wish to check that insurance policies have been reviewed and are up-to-date and that the council recognises insurance as a way of mitigating risks to public money. The panel does not seek to judge the appropriateness of the insurance policies themselves.
- Contracts, disciplinary/grievance procedures, a risk management policy and register of assets can be based on a model but tailored to the specific council. They are not published. The contract(s) for staff can be provided in redacted format, or if there are reasons why the contract cannot be shared then the council provides a statement from a full council meeting confirming that all staff are employed under an appropriate contract. The risk management policy shows the council has considered health and safety of staff, councillors and others as appropriate.
- A training and development policy for staff and councillors can be a short statement of intent while a training record gives dates, titles and providers of development activities undertaken by named individuals in the last year, including, for example, events, online courses, learning on the job and qualifications. Councillors undertake a range of development activities such as attending conferences, undertaking training, or reading about developments in the sector. The clerk's training record includes evidence of CPD such as training, conference attendance, mentoring and studying for qualifications. CPD points are allocated according to a system published by the IDB.

TO ACHIEVE THE QUALITY AWARD A COUNCIL DEMONSTRATES THAT IT MEETS ALL REQUIREMENTS OF THE FOUNDATION AWARD AND HAS ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION AND INFORMATION IN PLACE FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE, EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COUNCIL IMPROVEMENT. THE QUALITY AWARD CRITERIA INCLUDE THE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR THE GENERAL POWER OF COMPETENCE.

The council confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it meets all requirements for the Foundation Award and that it also publishes on its website:

GOVERNANCE	COMMUNITY	DEVELOPMENT
Criteria demonstrating good governance in managing the business and finances of a council	Criteria representing a council's role in the community and how it engages with the community	Criteria representing council improvement through the management and development of staff and councillors
Draft minutes of all council and committee meetings within four weeks of the last meeting	A community engagement policy involving two-way communication between council and community	
A Health and Safety policy	Councillor profiles	
Its policy on equality	A grant awarding policy	
	Evidence showing how electors contribute to the Annual Parish or Town Meeting	
	An action plan and related budget responding to community engagement and setting out a timetable for action and review	
	Evidence of community engagement, council activities and the promotion of democratic processes in an annual report, online material and regular news bulletins	
	Evidence of helping the community plan for its future	

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it has:

GOVERNANCE	COMMUNITY	DEVELOPMENT
Criteria demonstrating good governance in managing the business and finances of a council	Criteria representing a council's role in the community and how it engages with the community	Criteria representing council improvement through the management and development of staff and councillors
A scheme of delegation (where relevant)	At least two-thirds of its councillors who stood for election	A qualified clerk
	An annual report that is actively shared with the community	A formal appraisal process for all staff
	Evidence of a customer service in how the council handles correspondence with the public	A training policy and record for all staff and councillors

The council notifies the accreditation panel's co-ordinator when the resolution has been agreed and provides a completed application form, including webpage addresses to where the information can be found online.

WHAT IS THE ACCREDITATION PANEL LOOKING FOR?

The accreditation panel first checks that the criteria for the Foundation Award are in place if the award was granted more than one year ago. The exception to this is if the council received the Foundation award less than a year ago. Then the panel does not check the Foundation criteria again, but the council still confirms in a public meeting that it meets these criteria.

It then considers the additional criteria for the Quality Award.

The panel assesses the quality of documents and information with a light touch, seeking reassurance that the council is acting lawfully and according to good (rather than best) practice. The panel confirms that the documentation and information is in place and up-to-date and complies with the guidance below. For those documents that are not posted on the website, the panel may ask to see the evidence if it is considered necessary.

- All council policies should comply with current legislation and guidance and note the date of the next review.
- Draft minutes (marked Draft) of all council and committee meetings should be posted up as soon as possible after the meeting and within at least four weeks. The minutes will show that the council monitors its actions, internal controls and performance against the budget at least every three months.
- A community engagement policy demonstrates the council's commitment to hearing what people in the community think and communicating its own actions and decisions. The council also gives grants to community organisations and publishes a grant awarding policy.
- Councillor profiles normally contain a photo and reference to the ward represented (if relevant) but personal contact details are not required.
- The panel seeks evidence that the council has in place light touch policies for managing Health and Safety, including its duty of care to staff and promoting equality in compliance with legislation. For example, evidence might include employment documents or statements on agendas.
- Evidence that electors can contribute to the Annual Parish or Town Meeting can come in any form; for example, it could be an invitation to attend and participate in discussions or a record of how community groups spoke about their use of grant funding over the last year.
- The action plan (or similar forward plan) summarises findings from community engagement and sets out aims and objectives that respond to community views. The action plan includes a timetable for actions to be completed with dates for reviewing the plan. The council's budget shows how the action plan is put into practice and manages risks to public money.
- The council is expected to produce an annual report, online material and regular news bulletins throughout the year. The annual report and news bulletins must be online even if they were also distributed in hard copy such as in printed newsletters or village magazines. If the council uses social media such as Facebook or Twitter, this will be evident from the council's website. The accreditation panel will read the materials looking for evidence of community engagement, council activities and promoting democratic processes. The panel expects to see that the council consults the community in at least three different ways (such as surveys, focus groups, online or street polls and community workshops) and engages with other organisations, including community groups and the principal authority(ies). It will look for at least three positive actions for the community in the last year.

- The annual report should be actively communicated and shared with the community. It might be produced digitally and/or in hard copy. It is accepted that it cannot always be distributed to all households, but digital versions could be distributed by email and social media. Hard copies could be left at prime locations in a community, including a library, doctors' surgeries, schools, pubs, shops or residential homes.
- The panel seeks evidence from council documents and online information that it supports the community in planning for its future. This can include at least one contribution to creating, implementing or reviewing a parish or town plan, a design statement or a neighbourhood plan, holding community planning events, facilitating debate in the community about planning applications or registering community assets. The panel seeks evidence that the council has considered environmental matters as part of how it plans for the future of the community. This may be through the planning system such as considering environmental impact in neighbourhood plans, or through engagement with the community. The council might also undertake activities to engage with the community on the environment outside of the planning system, this might include tree planting, litter picking, reducing carbon and addressing climate change.
- The panel also seeks evidence of promoting elections and the value of the democratic process; this might include explaining how the system works, advising people of election dates and promoting the value of being a councillor.
- At the time of making the resolution, at least two-thirds of the seats on the council must be filled by councillors who stood for election at either the last ordinary elections or a by-election. This shows that the council represents the community through democratic processes. Councillors who stood for election, even if elected unopposed, do count, while councillors who were co-opted or appointed cannot count. If two thirds is not a whole number, then it must be rounded up to the next whole number using the table below.

Total council seats

5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

4 4 5 6 6 7 8 8 9 10 10 11 12 12 13 14

Two thirds

- The panel may wish to check that a council properly operates the delegation of decision-making to committees, sub-committees and officers (where relevant). Arrangements for delegation may be set out in standing orders or in a separate scheme of delegation.
- The panel seeks evidence of how the council handles correspondence with the public and takes a customer service approach. Evidence shows how the council plans for and manages correspondence with the public, this might include examples of the council has addressed complaints, queries and other communications in the past year. It might also include any policies or training for staff that illustrates the council's commitment to customer service.
- A qualified clerk is defined in Parish Councils (General Power of Competence) (Prescribed Conditions) Order 2012. The clerk (and deputy clerk) should be properly remunerated with a contract in accordance with terms and conditions set out in the national agreement or in a local government scheme.
- The panel may ask to see the document setting out the formal appraisal process that must be in place for all staff. It checks that the council has a training budget and may ask to see a general training policy for staff and councillors with a detailed record of all training undertaken by staff and councillors in the last year. The panel seeks assurance that a training culture is embedded in the council. The clerk is expected to achieve at least 12 Continuous Professional Development Points every year. The CPD guidance on how points are allocated can be downloaded from NALC's or SLCC's websites.

TO ACHIEVE A QUALITY GOLD AWARD A COUNCIL DEMONSTRATES THAT IT MEETS ALL REQUIREMENTS OF THE FOUNDATION AND QUALITY AWARDS, AND IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF BEST PRACTICE BY ACHIEVING AN EXCELLENT STANDARD IN COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE, COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT.

The council confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it meets all requirements for the Foundation and Quality Awards and also publishes on its website:

GOVERNANCE	COMMUNITY	DEVELOPMENT
Criteria demonstrating good governance in managing the business and finances of a council	Criteria representing a council's role in the community and how it engages with the community	Criteria representing council improvement through the management and development of staff and councillors
A business plan covering a financial forecast for at least three years linked to revenue and capital plans for the council and its community	An annual report, online material, news bulletins and other council communications with evidence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Engaging with diverse groups in the community using a variety of methods – Community engagement influencing council activity and priorities – A wide range of council activities, including innovative projects, that produce positive outcomes for the community – Co-operating constructively with other organisations 	

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting, that it has prepared statements (of no more than one page each) to be presented to the accreditation panel showing how it

GOVERNANCE	COMMUNITY	DEVELOPMENT
Criteria demonstrating good governance in managing the business and finances of a council	Criteria representing a council's role in the community and how it engages with the community	Criteria representing council improvement through the management and development of staff and councillors
Ensures that the council delivers value for money	Provides leadership in planning for the future of the community	Manages the performance of the council as a corporate body
	Engages with the community on issues related to the environment and climate change	Manages the performance of each individual staff member to achieve its business plan

The council notifies the accreditation panel when the resolution has been agreed and provides a completed application form, including webpage addresses to where the information can be found online, and the prepared statements.

WHAT IS THE ACCREDITATION PANEL LOOKING FOR?

The accreditation panel first checks that criteria for the Foundation and Quality Awards are in place if an award was assessed more than one year ago. It then considers the additional criteria for Quality Gold. The exception to this is if the council received a Foundation or Quality award less than a year ago. Then the panel does not check the criteria for that award again, but the council still confirms in a public meeting that it meets these criteria.

The panel assesses the quality of documents and information in some depth. It seeks reassurance that the council is acting lawfully and aspires to excellence. The panel also seeks evidence of councillors and officers working together as a corporate body to achieve the criteria at Quality Gold level. Complying with the guidance below, the panel confirms that up-to-date documentation and information for Quality Gold is in place. The panel may ask for further information or talk to councillors and staff. The panel will be interested to note whether the council already has a reputation for being at the forefront of best practice. Councils seeking the Quality Gold Award should be aware that the panel is a peer group applying their own standards of excellence to the criteria explained below.

- In identifying excellence, the panel confirms that the council operates within the law as explained in standard works of reference, demonstrates transparent, efficient and effective decision-making and governance and exercises sound financial management.
- The panel also seeks reassurance that the council is not experiencing destructive internal conflict or that nothing has occurred to bring the council into disrepute.
- The council works to a forward plan (or business plan) created for at least three years even if this takes the council beyond the next election. This plan explicitly responds to community engagement. It sets out the council's aims and objectives for both the council and the community and shows how they will be achieved including financial forecasts for both revenue and capital for the duration of the plan.
- The annual report, web material and news bulletins publicise the work and achievements of the council and contain substantial evidence that the council takes the lead in actively representing and serving all parts of its local community. The council therefore addresses the diversity of its community, including, for example, different age groups, service users, physical locations, housing types, language, employment status and skills.
- These sources of information also show that the council seeks out and responds to views and ideas expressed by its community. The council uses a variety of ways (at least four) of consulting and involving local people to understand their views. There should be evidence that the council identifies local needs and views through community engagement that are then addressed in constructive council action. These sources also show that the council promotes local democracy.
- The panel seeks evidence that community engagement is at the heart of determining council priorities. Evidence shows this engagement leads to actions and projects within the council that deliver positive outcomes for the community. The council is innovative; this is the case if the council undertakes actions that are still relatively new or unusual for that council. There is evidence that the council embraces new ideas and trying new projects. The panel also checks that the council is co-operating with other organisations, including community groups, its principal authority(ies) and other agencies to provide an effective service to the community. Co-operation includes but is not limited to partnerships.

- The statement on ensuring value for money explains how the council reviews the quality and costs of its activities to confirm that the costs are appropriate. This could include, for example, the cost of the clerk's role in serving the council, the purchase of computer equipment or a grass cutting contract. It may also include reference to criteria from the other award levels as a number of these criteria do provide evidence that the council offers value for money.
- The panel seeks evidence that the council has considered climate change and other environmental issues and has engaged with the community on these issues. The council will have considered how it can support or facilitate the community to take actions that could have a positive environmental impact for the local area, or more widely.
- The statement on leadership in planning for the future shows how the council engages with a range of activities that influence the planning system and facilitate community-led planning. Activities may include, for example, identifying and representing community views on planning applications and local plans, working on parish or town plans, or holding community-led planning activities such as Planning for Real® or community conferences. The statement should include the council's approach to neighbourhood planning.
- Finally, the statements on performance management explain the processes by which the performance of the council as a corporate body is constantly improved and shows how the performance, skills and knowledge of each individual in the council is managed to help the council achieve its objectives on behalf of the community. The statements also include confirming that each member of staff has their own professional development plan and that the majority of councillors participate in a member development programme that is specific to their roles and the needs of the council. It is important to show evidence that the council is a good employer.

A GUIDE TO THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The Local Council Award Scheme is a form of peer review. Councils are reviewed by experienced peers through the work of a local accreditation panel.

The aim of this accreditation process is to be as simple, efficient and flexible as possible. It also seeks to ensure that every council that wishes to take part in the scheme is able to, and is assessed in a reasonably consistent way.

REGISTRATION

1. The council registers its intention to apply for a specified award online at www.nalc.gov.uk/localcouncilawardscheme
2. Contact NALC at nalc@nalc.gov.uk or on 020 7637 1865.
3. The council pays a registration fee to NALC to cover the costs of managing the national scheme, including: administration, national online resources, quality assurance and review processes.
4. NALC provides the applicant with a template application form and the contact details of the co-ordinator of the appropriate accreditation panel.
5. NALC provides the panel co-ordinator with information of the council's application.
6. When a council is ready to make its application to the accreditation panel, its clerk notifies the panel co-ordinator that the council has passed a resolution confirming that all the documentation and information is in place for a specified award and submits a completed application form with any additional documentation required.
7. The council pays the accreditation fee which covers the costs administering the local service.
8. The local panel co-ordinator keeps a record of all applications and monitors their progress.
9. When the accreditation panel makes its decision it informs the council. It also completes an online form to allow NALC to update national records.

ONLINE CONNECTIVITY

The Award Scheme requires councils to publish certain information and documents online. In exceptional circumstances a council may not be able to put documents online because of poor digital connectivity in the local area. In this case, the council applies to the panel co-ordinator for permission to submit evidence for an award in an alternative format. The co-ordinator must be confident that poor digital connectivity is the problem rather than an unwillingness to use an online service for publishing council documents.

THE ACCREDITATION PANEL

The accreditation panel is set up by a County Association or a regional group of County Associations. The aim of any panel arrangement is to facilitate training, promote consistency and help manage the workload. Where an individual County Association is unable to support the scheme, a council will be able to submit their application

to an appropriate neighbouring or regional panel.

County Association's may adapt the accreditation process to fit local need. They are able to discuss this with the Improvement and Development Manager at NALC, for support and guidance.

The panel co-ordinator manages a pool of up to ten potential panel members, in the expectation that between three and five members are required to review each application. The panel includes experienced councillors and clerks as well as someone independent of the sector with an understanding of local government.

Panel membership should be reviewed by the panel co-ordinator every two years.

At the beginning of the accreditation process a panel is drawn together from the pool of potential members. The panel could choose a lead panellist or chair if needed to facilitate decision making.

All panel members are expected to use email or an online service to read a council's documents and also act in the spirit of a Code of Conduct; for example, they do not assess an award for their own or a neighbouring council.

The accreditation panel determines

how often an accreditation process occurs,

or an appropriate trigger for this to take place. For example, a panel may decide to convene every two months or may wait until the receipt of ten applications (as long as this is no later than two months after an application has been received). Panels should note that all costs of administering the panels must be met from application fees. So, to minimise costs, the panel can convene and conduct its business remotely rather than face-to-face. The resources provided by NALC will support this way of working.

The local panels have discretion

over the detail of how they organise the accreditation process.

In consultation with the panel co-ordinators, NALC will provide regularly updated guidance and support for accreditation panels.

THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The emphasis of the scheme is on encouraging and supporting the improvement of councils. The aim of the panel is therefore to help councils to achieve awards and panels are urged to be constructive.

The panel checks that the criteria for the relevant award have been met in published and/or requested information. Most documents and information will be posted on a website. Where it is not appropriate for a document or information to be on a website, the panel is permitted to ask to see electronic versions.

As all information and documents are available online or in electronic format, the panel's work can be done without meeting. Each member of the panel completes a form showing their responses to the co-ordinator. The co-ordinator reviews the completed forms from the panel which decides whether additional information or documents are required.

Panel members do not need to examine every document in detail but are advised to carry out spot-checks enabling them to make recommendations.

For Quality Gold, the panel may wish to discuss the council’s activities with councillors, or staff or visit the parish but the cost of doing so must be covered by the fee.

THE OUTCOME

When the panel is satisfied that it has seen sufficient information, the findings are presented in a report agreed by the panel. The panel makes one of three recommendations to the council:

- The Award is achieved.
- The Award is achieved but the council is advised to make some small changes.
- The Award is not achieved until specified improvements have been made.

If a council has applied for a higher award but has not achieved all the criteria, the panel can award a lower award if appropriate.

The aim of the scheme is to be supportive and help councils achieve the status they have applied for and so it is expected that achieving a lower (or no) award would be an exceptional circumstance. The panel should let the council know as soon as possible if it appears that they have omitted necessary evidence or it appears likely that they will not achieved the award, and the council should be given some time to respond to that feedback.

The co-ordinator informs the council of the outcome within two months of being notified of the application. They also inform NALC of the outcome and successful councils are included in a published list. NALC issues a certificate and provides resources to help the council celebrate and promote their achievement which is sent to the council and panel co-ordinator.

Councils and accreditation panels will be contacted by NALC for feedback on the process and the benefits of receiving the awards.

A council may appeal to the IDB (with an additional fee) if it feels that the panel’s decision is unjustified. The IDB will appoint two representatives to review the appeal and the IDB’s decision is final.

UPGRADING ACCREDITATION, RE-ACCREDITATION AND REMOVAL OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation lasts for four years.

Applying for a higher award:

- If a council wishes to apply for a higher award, it makes a fresh registration and application.
- A council can make a fresh application for a higher award at any time. If this is within one year of the previously successful accreditation, the panel does not need to revisit evidence that was previously approved.

Re-accreditation:

- The council may seek re-accreditation at the same level after four years. If it does not achieve a new accreditation or re-accreditation before four-year end-date, it loses its award.

Removal of accreditation:

- The council is expected to maintain its reputation by meeting the criteria throughout the four years.
- Although some circumstances may change, the council will not lose its award unless a significant event such as an audit, employment tribunal, court case or police investigation demonstrates the council’s poor performance. In this case, a panel co-ordinator asks the IDB to appoint two representatives to review the situation. The IDB assesses the severity of the case before deciding whether to impose a sanction which may include the removal of all awards or returning the council to a lower award.
- The council can appeal to the IDB if the decision to remove an award is taken in which case two different IDB representatives review the case and their decision is final.

FEES

There are two fees:

- A registration fee paid to the National Association of Local Councils
- An accreditation fee paid to the organisation responsible for administering the local or regional accreditation process.

The registration fee paid to NALC is £50 paid by all councils for each level regardless of size.¹

The accreditation fee² varies according to:

- The award applied for
- The income of the council
- The council’s accreditation history.

	ANNUAL INCOME UNDER £25,000	ANNUAL INCOME OVER £25,000
Foundation Standard	£50	£80
Quality Standard	£80	£100
Quality Gold	£100	£200

The accreditation fee covers the cost of the accreditation panel decision making process only. County Associations may charge additional costs for advice, training or support of applications. Those services and fees will be determined locally.

The IDB will review fee levels annually.

The fee is reduced by 20% if the council sought accreditation at a lower level within the previous 12 months as the checking process covering criteria for the previous award requires less work.

¹ All figures quoted are excluding VAT.

² The figures quoted are the discounted rates for members of NALC. Both the registration fee and accreditation fee are reduced by 50% for member councils. Non-member councils must pay the full fee ie double the figures quoted in this grid.

EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

The aim of the evaluation and improvement process is to allow councils to feel ownership of the scheme, and to see the scheme changing to meet the feedback and needs expressed by the sector. It should also allow the scheme to be dynamic and able to respond over time to changes in the sector, national policy and other relevant issues.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Twice a year, representatives of the IDB will check at random a small sample of awards by carrying out spot checks of documents and information posted on a council's website.

The findings will not affect a council's award but will be used to improve the training for accreditation panels and to inform regular reviews of the scheme.

EVALUATION

At the end of each accreditation process the council and the panel will be sent a short evaluation questionnaire. This will aim to gather feedback on the process, the criteria, the resources provided by NALC and how they could be improved.

One year after accreditation the council will be contacted again. The council will be encouraged to apply for the next level of award, to make use of the fee discount. The council will also be asked to describe the benefits they have felt from being accredited by the scheme and their feedback on the scheme as a whole.

IMPROVEMENT

The feedback collected will be used to inform improvements to the scheme. The whole scheme, including the content and accreditation process, will be reviewed every year.

These reviews will alternate between:

- A light touch approach only making urgent required changes where these are considered critical to the scheme.
- A wider ranging review aiming to best address collected feedback from all parties.
- The IDB will oversee all changes to the scheme.

